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ABSTRACT

The introductory writing course, English 101, at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, has gone through several stages in the last decade, changing from a course emphasizing writing in the rhetorical modes to an issue-oriented interdisciplinary course, to, at the present time, a course focusing on the writing process and on collaborative learning. One of the changes recently implemented requires all students to take the same course, including both the gifted and remedial writers. The remedial writers--along with any students voluntarily taking part--sign up for a fourth credit, which they earn mainly through work with student and faculty tutors. The success of the college's variable-credit first-year composition course depends, in large part, on the college writing center, which, excluding the director, is staffed entirely by undergraduate peer consultants. Student consultants are particularly apt in moving between the academic discourse of college professors and the more colloquial language of their peers. These peer consultants serve as mediators between faculty and new students, both in the writing center and in the classroom, where they help to facilitate peer review and editing sessions. Further, writing center staff teach writing as a recursive process whereby students use a dialogical rather than linear thought process. Sondra Perl (1980) argues that recursive writers move back and forth among such writing activities as planning, generating, organizing, and editing. (TB)

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1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication

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The Variable-Credit College Writing Course

Part One: Creating Community Through English 101

The introductory writing course, English 101, at St. John Fisher College has gone through several stages in the last decade, changing from a course emphasizing writing in the rhetorical modes to an issues-oriented interdisciplinary course, to, at the present time, a course focusing on the writing process and on collaborative learning. Our reflection, as a faculty, on the changes the course has gone through has brought us to the understanding that through this course, writing serves the needs of several groups at the College: the course is a locus for the department's consideration of student needs, for its own state of knowledge about the writing process, and for how it can serve to build community within the department and the College.

The changes in the course have been made to adapt to changing student population and student needs, and also to adapt to changing pedagogical concerns of the faculty. Ten years ago, in 1984, English 101 was a traditional writing course in which students wrote papers based on rhetorical models. The course was oriented toward a Test of Competence in Writing (TCW), a one-hour essay test which was also a graduation requirement (it had been implemented by the English department itself in 1980); students took this TCW as a final exam in 101. Although the faculty met to implement the TCW--writing questions for it, grading it, etc., they did not otherwise collaborate to a great degree in teaching the course.

In 1989, the department decided the course could better prepare students for college writing if a series of interdisciplinary books were substituted for writing handbooks; the course was redesigned to include more discussion of issues, and writing assignments were geared toward those issues as well. Because the course now focused on texts, a territory familiar to the faculty at that time, all of whom taught literature courses as well as writing courses, the course also became a basis for collaboration among faculty. All 101 sections used the same books, and meetings became a place to share ideas about the texts and about strategies for teaching writing. The portfolio system

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of evaluation and peer review groups for in-class work on writing were also implemented at this time.

Five years later, in 1994, the faculty evaluated the course and concluded that too much time had come to be spent in discussion of books; faculty felt rushed to get through the literary material and students were not being given enough time for and help with their writing. The interdisciplinary tests were dropped, and common texts used by all sections were changed to texts about the writing process (presently, Donald Murray's *Write to Learn* and Elbow and Belanoff's *Sharing and Responding*). Some faculty also utilize a multicultural anthology, but more class time is spent with texts specifically focused on the writing process and peer group review. The TCW was abolished in 1993; instead, we are trying to institute writing intensive courses at higher levels in our department and a writing across the curriculum program at the college.

The major change we've experienced is in the philosophy of our pedagogy. Coming from a small school, we've increasingly realized how helpful and necessary such a course is to the sense of community at the college among both students and faculty members. Although it may seem the course has come full circle, from writing course to reading course to writing course again, there are differences that make it clear how the course is serving broader needs than those of the individual faculty member teaching the course. First, Fisher has no "first-year course" which all entering students take; English 101 is as close as they come. Therefore, the continuity among sections is an important element in the first-year students' experience at the college. We feel the pedagogical aims of the course--emphasizing student ownership of the course and the writing process through a peer review process and portfolio evaluation--is an important fact of community building among the students and a fitting introduction to what learning should be like at the college level. In addition, faculty working together on text selection and meeting continuously to discuss pedagogic concerns and ideas works to strengthen a small department where most faculty are alone in their field of expertise.

To support these pedagogical goals, the department made another change in the most recent semesters of the course. The College requires English 101 of all students; in the past, the department read placement exams in order to screen out those determined to be in need of a preparatory course,

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English 100, which was treated as a remedial course. Several sections were taught each fall. In our recent bout with curriculum evaluation, English department faculty felt that the course's disadvantages were outweighing its advantages. First, the students placed into English 100 felt stigmatized, and this was especially evident to those of us who found them, bitter and demoralized, in our English 101 classes the following semester. Second, the full-time faculty had not shown interest in teaching the course; it was always taught by adjunct faculty. Third, placement into the course depended on a one-hour test, and this placement method was fraught with all the problems and unreliability of barrier exams.

Instead of a remedial course, the department has instituted a variable credit English 101 course--a fourth credit added on to the regular three-credit course. Students are still "placed" into a fourth credit; however, that placement is done by following a process that encapsulates the way papers will be written during the semester (in-class brainstorming, peer review work on papers, revision, and a push toward more self-conscious writing through several in and out-of-class) by two faculty members and students are then assigned to the fourth-credit. The fourth credit is a combination of one-on-one meetings with the professor and work with student peer tutors, since our Writing Center does not utilize faculty tutors (except for ESL). We assign visits to create an additional fifteen hours of "class" time (ten of these hours must be spent in the Writing Center) and also require extra written work, most of which is focused on increasing the student's self-awareness of the writing process. Importantly, students can also volunteer for this fourth-credit, and many have.

There are many advantages to this way of including students who need extra help in the English 101 course. First, not only do students not feel "held back," they do not feel especially stigmatized, since we stress the positive aspects of the process through the "plug" for volunteers in the fourth credit. Second, the Writing Center tutors become an integral part of student success in the course, a partnership of sorts. On the whole, this has worked well in creating relationships between the faculty and the student tutors, and between students. Students are also placed in the fourth credit as a result of a process that takes into account all the ways writing is done in the course; group work and revision are included. Of course, disadvantages are that faculty may treat the fourth credit as something only the writing center is responsible for, and

they may not involve themselves with the students beyond assigning the hours in the writing center; this can be resolved, for the most part, with communal goal-setting sessions with all faculty at the beginning of the term.

In small schools, a basic writing course must fulfill several functions: in addition to teaching writing, we've found ourselves acclimating students to academic life, fostering new friendships among students, and providing a forum for faculty development. In doing so, we've found the variable-credit course to be a successful part of our increasingly collaborative model of teaching writing and creating community.

Part Two: Weaving Together Diverse Discourses in the Writing Center

The success of St. John Fisher College's variable-credit first-year composition course depends in large part on the college writing center, which (excluding the Director and one professional ESL tutor) is staffed entirely by undergraduate Peer Consultants in Writing. Student Consultants are particularly apt in moving between the academic discourse of college professors and the more colloquial language, both written and oral, of their peers. They therefore act as translators, explaining assignments and the conventions of formal academic discourse and helping students to explore the margins of those conventions.

Peer Writing Consultants serve as mediators between students and teachers within both the writing center and the classroom. In the first instance, English 101 students bring their papers into the center during all stages of the writing process. For example, a Peer Consultant might teach her client brainstorming techniques such as listing and freewriting, or the two might work on such final activities as proofreading or editing. Having already been through the Basic College Writing course, Peer Consultants are familiar with the course content and can discuss with their clients their own relatively recent experience, including successes as well as setbacks. Undergraduate tutors, familiar with the conventions and lexicon of writing as a discipline, also help students to understand what their professors mean by phrases like, "substantiate the assertions you put forth in paragraph three" and "use a coordinating conjunction when linking two independent clauses with a coma." Such translation is necessary, because oftentimes the very

terminology that facilitates the discourse of professors is hopelessly vexing to undergraduates just entering the academic community.

In the second case, writing center staff visit 101 classrooms during peer editing sessions. Students workshop their papers in small groups, while both instructor and Peer Consultant move from group to group answering questions and facilitating discussion. During these visits, writing center staff act as Teaching Assistants who conference with their groups in the same manner as the instructor, again, acting as immediate translators for the different discourses of college students and professors. This experience almost always serves to demystify the role of the student Writing Consultant and, more generally, the writing center itself. Although writing center staff members strive to maintain a casual, "user-friendly" atmosphere underscored by a attitude of professionalism, students often feel intimidated about approaching writing "experts." Classroom visits enable students to overcome their diffidence about asking for and receiving academic support in the writing center.

The St. John Fisher College writing center is driven by theories of active, collaborative learning. In "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" Ken Bruffee writes,

> [I]f we accept the premise that knowledge is an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers and that learning is a social process not an individual one, then learning is not assimilating information and improving our mental eyesight. Learning is an activity in which people work collaboratively to create knowledge or justify belief collaboratively by canceling each other's biases and presuppositions; by negotiating collectively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression; and by joining larger, more experienced communities of knowledgeable peers through assenting to those communities' interests, values, language, and paradigms of perception and thought. (12)

Writing center Peer Consultants comprise one group of knowledgeable peers, a group that occupies the middle ground between student and academic discourse. Eleanor Kutz argues that, as teachers, we must "combine beginning with and validating the students' current language, pushing the development of language and thought in meaningful contexts, and initiating students into academic discourse conventions" (390). Student tutors, whether

within the writing center or the classroom, occupy a figurative liminal space, one through which students must pass in order to integrate themselves in an academic culture whose language varies from one discipline to another.

Although tutorials are collaborative, we encourage the client to read his paper aloud; avoid taking the paper out of the writer's hands; do not write on a client's paper (however, they may take notes on a separate sheet of paper); do not correct errors for writer. In addition, Peer Consultants use a variety of techniques to encourage student writers to think for themselves, such as using a handbook to correct an error in grammar or usage; asking questions in order to promote conceptual fluency; teaching students to generate and develop topics through the use of heuristics such as tree or circle diagrams and double entry listings.

Writing center staff teach writing as a recursive process whereby students use a dialogical rather than linear thought process. Sondra Perl argues that recursive writers move back and forth among such writing activities as planning, generating, organizing, and editing. Perl writes,

> Writers construct their discourse inasmuch as they begin with a sense of what they want to write. . . Rereading or backwards movements become a way of assessing whether or not the words on the page adequately capture the original sense intended. Constructing simultaneously affords discovery. Writers know more fully what they mean only after having written it. In this way the explicit written form serves as a window on the implicit sense with which one began. (26)

Many students do not look upon writing as a process that is inextricably linked to thinking and learning. As Nancy Sommers argues, inexperienced student writers often conflate the activities of revision and editing: "By staging revision after enunciation," Sommers asserts, "the linear models reduce revision in writing, as in speech, to no more than an afterthought" (87).

Because students are likely to see revision as a last minute attempt at editing, it is important that supplemental writing center visits for Variable-credit 101 students take place on a regular, mandatory basis: once they have been placed, students are required to complete one writing center session per week throughout the semester. Ten visits during the last week of the semester are not going to benefit anyone, including writing center

consultants, who need to develop and refine their own skills through extensive experience.

As teachers of Composition, our basic goal is not to remediate students in separate courses or punish them with weekly consignment to the writing center. Rather, we offer them a shared intellectual and cultural experience and exposure to peers who represent a wide range of writing skills. For those students whose skills are lacking in some way, we offer the support they need to succeed in any course that involves writing. We emphasize process over product, a recursive rather than linear style of thinking and writing. We attempt to treat students as individuals who learn in a variety of ways. The fourth credit, the one hour each week in the writing center, allows us to teach students according to their won learning styles and to help them create their own repertoire of writing strategies and techniques that will allow them to succeed as writers both during and beyond their college years.

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